



Taking Center Stage

Executive Summary

In 1998, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Delaine Eastin established her Middle Grades Task Force to provide guidance to educators on implementing standards-based education and to update the 1987 grade level document, *Caught in the Middle*. After nearly three years of work, a new grade-span reform document entitled *Taking Center Stage: A Commitment to Standards-based Education for California's Middle Grades Students* was published and distributed to schools and County and District Superintendents in March 2001.

Taking Center Stage builds on and extends the earlier *Caught in the Middle* — showing how to combine a rich student-centered middle grades philosophy with the rigors of a standards-based education.

The document provides clear recommendations on how schools can achieve a coordinated system where standards, assessment, accountability, and curriculum are aligned and focus on ensuring that all students meet grade-level standards.

Taking Center Stage builds on and extends the earlier *Caught in the Middle* — showing how to combine a rich student-centered middle grades philosophy with the rigors of a standards-based education. The new 271-page document is designed for both classroom teachers and principals and provides a wealth of theoretical and practical information about implementing standards-based education in the middle grades. Included are discussions about:

- ⌘ Standards-based education
- ⌘ Content and performance standards
- ⌘ Assessment --- local, state, formative, and summative
- ⌘ Accountability
- ⌘ Differentiated Instruction
- ⌘ How middle grade students learn
- ⌘ Importance of time in ensuring that all students attain the standards
- ⌘ Academic literacy as a key to equal access for all students
- ⌘ Ending social promotion and developing strategies to avoid retention
- ⌘ Creating high quality after-hours programs for middle grade students
- ⌘ Importance of health, safety, and individual resilience
- ⌘ Site-based, standards-oriented professional development

Taking Center Stage is the companion to the two other recent grade-span reform documents, *Elementary Makes the Grade* and *Aiming High*. All three documents were developed around seven key, cross-cutting concepts. Taken together, the three documents provide schools and districts the blueprints they will need to develop a quality, articulated, and comprehensive, standards-based program for each and every student.

Reciprocal Accountability

“A system of accountability ultimately means that each and every stakeholder assumes both a personal and a collective responsibility.”

Chapter 4
Taking Center Stage

An important theme that is woven throughout the new middle grades document is the need for all stakeholders (including students, parents, teachers, administrators, school boards, the state, and the public) to assume both personal and collective responsibility for ensuring that every student receives the kind of support necessary for achieving the standards.

Differentiated Instruction

Another important theme in *Taking Center Stage* is the need for differentiated instruction for all students. Some of the characteristics of a differentiated middle grades classroom are:

- Curricular content is presented in multiple ways — deductively, inductively, aurally, orally, visually, or by ‘hands-on’ doing.
- Direct instruction and discovery instruction are complementary strategies used to enhance learning.
- Relevant content standards are made explicit at the beginning of, during, and after instruction.
- Teachers assign work to individual students, small groups, and whole class.
- Formative assessment is frequently used to group and regroup students to ensure every student receives the most pertinent and highest quality instructional program possible.
- Student progress is reported in ways that parents, students, and teachers fully understand and that are consistent with the standards.
- Students who are not making adequate progress are supported by re-teaching, tutoring, and additional learning time.
- Teachers play the role of ‘academic coaches’ moving all students as far as possible.

Locally Developed Standards-based Assessment System

“A great need exists at the local level for assessments employing performance tasks . . . the ‘doing’ of the content standards.”

Chapter 3
Taking Center Stage

Taking Center Stage develops a persuasive rationale for why districts should develop their own local, standards-based assessment system to parallel the State’s system. Local assessments are necessary companions because they fill a role that statewide assessments cannot. Generally, statewide assessments assess only those standards that can be measured through paper-and-pencil format in a limited amount of time. The absence of some standards from a paper-and-pencil statewide assessment does not mean that these standards are unimportant or inconsequential. Local standards-based assessments are needed to fill the gap. As *Taking Center Stage* says: “A great need exists at the local level for assessments employing performance tasks . . . the ‘doing’ of the content standards.”

Standards-based Professional Development at the School Site

A direct relationship exists between a school's effectiveness in implementing standards-based education and the knowledge and skills possessed by the school's professional staff. *Taking Center Stage* concludes —

“School-based professional development is critical to the success of standards-based education.”

The document calls for an emphasis on collegial professional development at the school site level, saying, “school-based staff development is one of the most potent ways of building collegial norms among teachers and principals. *Taking Center Stage* also calls for time and resources to be made available for this purpose.

More Information

Contact the Middle Grades Office in the California Department of Education. The office mailing address is

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Copies of <i>Taking Center Stage</i> may be purchased for \$13.50 through CDE Press 1-800-995-4099.



Recommendations

Taking Center Stage

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The following recommendations for implementing a standards-based education for middle school students are taken from the 2001 publication [*Taking Center Stage*](#).

I. Rigorous Academic Content and Performance Standards

1. Implement rigorous and consistent standards while maintaining a dynamic student-centered culture.
2. Provide sustaining resources and support for standards-based education.

II. Curriculum and Instruction

3. Demonstrate commitment to essential elements of the middle grades philosophy.
4. Align curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices with the California content and performance standards.
5. Connect the contributions of California's diverse multicultural population as standards are implemented.
6. Use technology as a tool to improve and increase student academic achievement.
7. Examine the use of time to provide students and teachers opportunities to plan, integrate, teach, and learn.
8. Work with feeder elementary schools and destination high schools to provide consistent expectations and seamless transitions.

III. Assessment and Accountability

9. Relate performance standards to content standards to define levels of academic excellence and proficiency.
10. Develop classroom and local assessment data systems that are used to determine appropriate instructional practices.
11. Hold all stakeholders accountable for high academic and behavioral expectations.

IV. Student Interventions

12. Provide appropriate accelerated interventions based on the results of relevant assessment instruments.

V. Professional Development

13. Provide relevant and appropriate school-based, comprehensive, ongoing, professional development.

VI. Parent and Community Partnerships

14. Engage families and the community to support student achievement.

VII. Health and Safety

15. Create and sustain safe school environments.
16. Provide access to health and social services to maximize student well-being.

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